"The Aesthetics of Politics," Arnold Berleant *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), pp. 213-224.
"Die ästhetische Umweltpolitik" (German translation of "The Aesthetics of Politics"), *Polylog*: *Zeitschrift für Internkulturelles Philosophieren*, 29 (2013), 5-20.

The Aesthetics of Politics

The aesthetic and the political

It is one of the wonders of philosophy that an idea should persist despite all possible evidence for abandoning it. Of the many ideas to which this comment can apply, the one that is most pertinent here is the belief in the autonomy of art. One can understand why such a belief should take hold. Many factors connected with art suggest that much of its force and value lies in the relative independence of making and appreciating art. The creative impulse is always unbridled and unpredictable, and often it is coupled with the healthy influence of deliberate iconoclasm. Less obvious is the directness of aesthetic engagement in appreciation and its opportunity for original experience. But independence is a different matter from autonomy, and claims for absolute self-sufficiency in art, as in social life, are wishful but ungrounded.

Our reconsideration of the aesthetic and the artistic did not support the autonomy of the artistic enterprise but, on the contrary, demonstrated its responsiveness to the forces in the human world. Whether as subject-matter, referent, incentive, or motive,

the larger and all-inclusive social world is immanent in art in diverse and often unpredictable ways.[1] And, conversely, aesthetic perception, which lies at the heart of art, is immanent and pervasive in the human world. Exposing the many strands and layers of the influence of the aesthetic, as I have tried to do, reveals as much about human sociality as about art.

It is not easy or simple to peer through the conceptual miasma that blankets perceptual experience. At the same time, a stunning revelation emerges as we begin to recognize the influences that inform it. I have already described how perception is never wholly private but is shrouded in multiple associations, structures, and assumptions through which it is shaped, directed, and interpreted. This has profound political implications. It means, in fact, that there is no clear beginning: no pure sensation, no guiding axiom, no original condition, no *sensus communis*. Nor can we begin with radical subjectivity, with consciousness, phenomenology notwithstanding. In fact, we must recognize the presumption rather than the priority of subjectivity, that storm anchor of the Western philosophical tradition.

Subjectivism, moreover, is not only a misleading idea and a dangerous illusion: it is also an obstacle to a transformative politics. Few commentators have been able to liberate themselves from its tenacious pull,[2] and this inability acts to impede and indeed

prevent the re-founding of a politics of freedom. For freedom, as it is commonly understood, is bound up in the related tradition of individualism yet, as we have seen, the assumptions underlying individualism can also be placed in serious question. Yet how else can we proceed? How else can we conceive of freedom, of the political sphere, of the human world if not in terms of subjectivity and individualism?

In its root meaning as sense perception, aesthetics, when pursued with an effort to set aside cognitive meaning and prejudgment, becomes a kind of radical phenomenology. Perception is never pure, never somatically direct, as William James pointed out,[3] and we saw earlier how we invariably edit and add to sensation.[4] One of philosophy's unending tasks is to articulate and examine the grounds and significance of pre-cognitive processes and, perhaps we might add, post-cognitive processes, as well as cognitive ones. These processes are well-disguised behind multiple structures designed to hide or render them palatable, from the euphemisms of linguistic fig leaves to self-gratifying, pseudo-scientific cosmologies religious or ideological in origin. Burke saw the danger with admirable clarity: "When we go but one step beyond the immediately sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth. All we do after, is but a faint struggle, that shews we are in an element which does not belong to us."[5]

Setting aside the natural attitude, the classical precondition to phenomenological description, is only one of philosophy's primary steps. To suspend the assumption of existence only begins Salome's dance by discarding the outermost of the many interpretive layers that veil sense perception. Indeed, the source of much of the continuing freshness and vitality of the arts lies in their uninhibited use of pre-cognitive perception, a force that persists despite every effort to capture and constrain art by reductive explanations.

Let me review briefly some of what we now understand about the multifarious influences on sense perception. We know, with all the qualifications that must be assigned to any knowledge claim, that social influences and pressures affect our apprehension of the very data of sensory perception. Social psychologists have amassed a large body of experimental evidence that documents the effects of such influence.[6] We have also noted the powerful challenge to the presumed objectivity and independence of truth provided by the continuing work in the sociology of knowledge that began in the 1920s and '30s. This shows how our understanding of reality is socially constructed, and that "whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society…is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations" and forms the reality that is taken for granted.[7] The very foundation of what is distinctively human in perception is its character as a socially and historically achieved and changing mode of action; and is

thereby invested with a cognitive, affective and teleological character that exemplifies perception as a social and not merely a biological or neurophysiological activity. What is more, perception is not an activity of the perceptual system or of a specific sense-modality but an activity of the whole organism. Heidegger, too, recognized the powerful influence of cultural tradition. "All philosophical discussion, even the most radical attempt to begin all over again, is pervaded by traditional concepts and thus by traditional horizons and traditional angles of approach."[8]

More recently, deconstruction has emerged as a methodology of critical analysis and argumentation for questioning underlying ideas and raising basic questions without limit or end, a kind of terminal yet productive incompleteness. We might even complement this by recognizing in the body of theoretical and practical certitude offered by the sciences the unavoidable but qualifying influence of the experimenter on every investigation. What well may be emerging here is a vastly different notion of human knowledge from the ideal of absolute certitude and completeness that has stood as the standard from classical times to the twentieth century. I do not mean to diverge into an epistemological study here, but it is necessary for our critical purposes to acknowledge these factors as the ground for any discussion of basics and beginnings and not to elevate consuetude beyond its proper measure.

This is not to psychologize or sociologize philosophy but to recognize that philosophy is not independent and that its claims for priority are inadequate if they do not take into account the psychological and social conditions that affect all inquiry. The attempt to find a true beginning in consciousness, whether perceptual or cognitive, cannot be sustained. At the same time, we need not wait for physiological psychology to explain what constitutes consciousness: brain functions can identify organic causal events but they do not dissolve their manifestations. Consciousness may be a question but it is not an answer.

Considerable illumination comes from the work of anthropologists, sociologists, and other behavioral scientists, all of whom have demonstrated in detail the formation of conscious thought in the human interactions through which cultural, linguistic, historical, and cognitive ideas and structures are shaped and absorbed. The body of evidence accrued by these sciences is overwhelming. What is needed is to acknowledge that evidence and incorporate it into our philosophical deliberations. Putting aside traditions ignorant of such facts is the pre-condition of fresh and liberating understanding. This is hardly the final truth in such matters, for we cannot legislate future inquiry, but it enables us to dispense with whatever inherited doctrines cannot endure the light of the present.

Aesthetic politics

To what kind of politics can an aesthetics of perception lead? Much of the history of Western political thought is mired in mythology, and one of the most persistent myths concerns the origin of the human community. Indeed, origins are one of the favored subjects of myth and the seventeenth century fiction of the state of nature incorporated many of the common explanatory features of such myths. I call this a fiction because it is an entirely imaginative construction that provides a presumably rational explanation of the formation of community out of a loose, inchoate collection of people who, in a correlative myth, contract with one another to establish political order. The presumptive conditions under which they do this vary with the version, such as the classic ones proposed by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Hume or, more recently, by Rawls's notion of the "original position." And just as varied are the political orders that they justify, from absolute monarchy to liberal democracy. One can understand the appeal to an age of reason of so rational a reconstruction, but this merely adds a second myth to the first, of a social contract to a state of nature, pandering to our present age of narrow calculation in the service of wider unreason. Still, the myth of a pre-social condition persists.

As we have seen throughout this book, an aesthetically-guided philosophical process can help identify and expose the multiple layers of assumptions, constructions, axiomatic presuppositions, and cultural teachings that obscure sense perception so thickly. Salome's dance never ends. Still, it is appropriate to ask if the landscape of an

aesthetic politics begins to appear through the haze. Do we discern there the polis as the model of an aesthetic polity? Is it still useful as an ideal of human community, for with all its historical limitations and failings, the polis was, for a brief time, actual? Much of its appeal lies in the fact that the polis joined community with law and a participatory, self-determining socio-political process in which there was no alienation of citizen and state.[9]

And what of the perceptual commons? What can this contribute to an aesthetic politics? I believe there is much to be discovered here. The perceptual commons is a germinal idea that expands into a many-petalled bloom. It can contribute to dispelling the mists of myth before the direct force of experience. And still more important, it provides the basis for commonality and all the nurturing support this condition can provide.

Many features of a positive politics are implicit in the idea of a perceptual commons. The presence of such a commons entitles everyone who shares that experience to participate equally in its enhancements and possibilities. Entitlement without access is empty, and therefore conditions and facilities must be present that enable all people to make free and full use of the commons. Enabling, however, is not sufficient, for people have not only to be informed but induced to participate, and so the

availability of the commons needs also to be promoted. From this emerges, not the familiar ethics of penury but an ethics of profusion. And from this we can generate an ethics of care, not conflict; of justice, not privilege.

To emphasize the aesthetic in experience is to engage in openness, cooperation, connectedness, vulnerability. Ken-ichi Sasaki observes that "When it was coming into existence, aesthetics was charged with the real and urgent philosophical problem of its time: how to construct a new world."[10] This remains its continuing charge in the face of what stands as a perennial problem. Perhaps emancipation from a tradition of negative mythology and the practices of negative sociality will make it possible for a new aesthetics to provide a source of new patterns to develop and fresh models to emulate in the quest for positive culture.[11]

Conclusion

The task of constructing the outlines of a new world is, I believe, the most urgent philosophical challenge of our time, and it is by starting with aesthetics that this can best be undertaken. To show why and how this reconstruction can proceed has been the intent of this book. Its breadth of inquiry has encompassed the major domains of philosophic thought: ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, all under the guidance of an aesthetics of perception. It has been

necessary to cast the range of inquiry so broadly in order both to ground the aesthetic and to establish its proper context. But what I most hope to have done is clear the terrain of many of the conceptual and structural obstacles that confound our thought and occlude our understanding, difficulties for many of which philosophy is particularly responsible. And I hope to have established the conditions for the power of the aesthetic to illuminate and liberate our grasp of the world on which we have placed our indelible mark.

It may be that the perceptual commons we have been considering is another way of identifying the human environment, the human world, and that in shaping environment we are enhancing and making coherent all its participating constituents. How this perceptual landscape is appropriated, designed, and populated concerns everyone, and it allows endless possibilities, both aesthetic and political. We cannot help but be affected by the crass and exploitative uses of the human environment in the political, military, industrial, and commercial co-optations of the perceptual conditions of human life. An aesthetics of perception offers an alternative, and this, in turn, can provide the means by which to transform the human world.

But even as the perceptual commons is environmental, it is first and foremost aesthetic. This is why the aesthetic verges on the political and where its unique social contribution lies. Such a perspective leads Sasaki to note,

> What we learn from early modern aesthetics is that when basic values become suspect and or even invalid, aesthetic judgment is the only path towards the establishment of new values…. [M]easuring the goodness of a new world by its beauty can also be an important guide at a turning point in civilization. But consider this: there is beauty in the tracks of missiles flying against a dark sky, and sublimity in the collapse of a glacier. While beauty is the only direct mark of value, it is also involved in an undeniable ambiguity in our contemporary civilization. I am convinced that the most real and important task of aesthetics is to speculate on this ambiguity on the horizon of our global civilization. [12]

Sasaki echoes Schiller by introducing beauty in establishing new values. The aesthetics of politics is not about beauty in the conventional sense as commonly applied to art and nature, or even in an extended sense when attached to character or to a life. I am not proposing in the aestheticization of culture a culture of aesthetics, of aesthetes, or of art. Yet the concept of beauty does nonetheless crystallize the core of positive

value that is fulfilled in the aesthetic. Understood in this way, beauty may be taken to represent or, better yet, to symbolize the fulfillment of a social aesthetic.

Perhaps, then, I can conclude this inquiry into the power of the aesthetic to transform the human world by turning to it as a standard of fulfillment and not only of criticism. For the aesthetic possesses the capabilities of both. The ambiguity of beauty can only be resolved by recognizing its inseparability from the moral. The experience of beauty, Schiller argued, brings people together; it reconciles conflicts within a person and among people. Beauty is thus not mere delectation but a conciliatory force. Its social significance lies in its capabilities for reconciliation, and it is this that gives beauty a moral standing.

Indeed, the multivalence of beauty appears in recognizing its bond with the moral. Ultimately the morality of beauty and the beauty of morality cannot be kept separate. Each enhances and contributes to the other. We can no longer look at any event as exclusively aesthetic in the conventional, narrow sense of beauty, for doing so only contributes to its isolation. So we must free ourselves from the myth of aesthetic disinterestedness, a view that rests on a contrived, even false ordering of the world.[13] It is one thing to identify and distinguish aesthetic value; it is quite another to separate it from its inherence in the objects, events, and conditions of the human world.

What is most forceful in a fulfilled experience with the arts is our complete absorption in perceptual experience that has temporal depth conjoined with the resonance of memory and meaning, what I have called aesthetic engagement. Yet this account of aesthetic experience in the arts is at the same time a description of human relations, both personal and social, at their most fulfilling – of a social aesthetic. For in the aesthetic we discover the human world, and in reconstituting the aesthetic we laid the groundwork for reconstructing a more humane world. This world is first aesthetic, and that is why the aesthetic verges on the political, where its transformative powers make possible its unique social contribution.

I know the truth! All other truths - out of my sight!
There is no cause for us to hold these fights and battles!
Just take a look: there's evening, look: there's night.
Why do we fight - O poets, lovers, and commanders?

The grass is dewy and the wind has settled down,
And soon, the vortex of the stars will stop,
And we shall all sleep with our foes below the ground,

Though on this earth, we kept each other up.

Marina Tsvetaeva[14]

ENDNOTES

[1] These considerations say nothing about historical and social factors, such as the aesthetic movement, *art pour l'art*, and other expressions of romantic ideology.

[2] Subjectivism is one of the most pervasive and powerful intellectual forces in modern Western thought, resembling in these respects Cartesian dualism, to which it is related, and almost equally ineradicable.

[3] "[T]he general law of perception, which is this: that *whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part* (and it may be the larger part) *always comes out of our own mind."* William James, *Psychology* (Holt,1892), p. 329.

[4] See Part One, especially Chapter Four.

[5] Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Part Four, Section 1, pp.117-118.

[6] Among the classical experiments are Asch's studies on the influence of social pressure on visual perception and Hastorf and Cantril's study of the influence of motives on group perception. Studying the perception by the onlookers of a contentious football game, Hastorf and Cantril concluded that "out of all the occurrences going on in the environment, a person selects those that have some significance for him from his own egocentric position in the total matrix." The event they studied "actually was many different games" and the varying accounts observers gave of what took place were equally real to them. The study found that people's perceptions were influenced by what they wanted to see. The researchers concluded, "In brief, the data here indicate that there is no such 'thing' as a 'game' existing 'out there' in its own right which people merely 'observe.' The game 'exists' for a person and is experienced by him only insofar as certain happenings have significances in terms of his purpose." Albert Hastorf and Hadley Cantril, "They Saw a Game: A Case Study," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1954.

[7] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality, A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 3. This book provides an excellent account of the field. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1954) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 22.

Arnold Berleant, "On Judging Scenic Beauty," in *Aesthetic Culture: Essays in Honour of Yrjö Sepänmaa*, ed. S. Knuuttila, E. Sevänen, and R. Turunen (Maahenki Co: 2007), endnote 5, p. 74. Also see Marx Wartofsky, "Perception, Representation, and the Forms of Action: Towards an Historical Epistemology" (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: Boston Colloquium for the Philosophy of Science, 1985).

[8] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1954) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 22.

[9] Maryvonne Saison, in "The People Are Missing," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 6 (2008), pursues the idea of an aesthetic sociability in the thought of Deleuze, Foucault and others with great sensitivity.

[10] Ken-ichi Sasaki, "The Politics of Beauty," paper delivered at the XXII World Congress of Philosophy, Seoul, Korea, August 2008, §0. See also Salim Kemal,

"Nietzsche's Genealogy – Of Beauty and Community," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 21/3 (October 1990), 234-49. Reprinted in *Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morals*," critical essays ed. Christa Davis Acampora (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

[11] It is not in the spirit of these remarks but nonetheless necessary to acknowledge that any and all of these features of a positive aesthetics can easily be subverted and turned into instruments of oppression, as human history so eloquently documents. But my purpose is not to safeguard aesthetics from sadistic misuses. There will always be those whose ingenuity can easily find ways to drag the banner of human ideals in the mud. If humans ever develop a civilized culture, such perverse efforts will wither on sterile soil and their perpetrators afforded compensatory care.

[12] *Ibid.,* § 5.

[13] See Chapter Five, above. An extended critique of the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness appears in A. Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics, Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), Pt. I.

[14] “I Know the truth,” Marina Tsvetaeva, 1915, trans. Andrey Kneller. Used by kind permission of the translator.